



Randolph Macdonald

LADY EATON

At work in the library of Eaton Hall, 1956.

MEMORY'S WALL

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
FLORA McCREA EATON

WITH A FOREWORD BY

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
ARTHUR MEIGHEN



Toronto
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1956

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To My Children

Timothy Craig

John David

Edgar Allison

Gilbert McCrea

Florence Mary
(Mrs. Frank F. McEachren)

Evlyn Beatrice (adopted)
(Mrs. Russel T. Payton)

And My Grandchildren

John Craig II
Frederic Stefan
Thor Edgar
George Ross

Timothy Craig II
Nancy Ann

Gilbert Flavelle
Signy Elizabeth (adopted)

Lynn
Constance
Russel II (adopted)

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P R E F A C E

To my children and grandchildren:

AT LAST I have attempted the story of my life and times. Perhaps it is not quite in the vein which you intended when you used to beg me to consider the project, but, even so, I think I have covered many of the things you wanted written: my childhood, friends and relatives, travels, and events great and small as I experienced them.

This undertaking really began when my grandson, John Craig Eaton II, then ten years old, asked me to take him to Omemee "where you lived when you were a little girl". A short while later Uncle Arthur (my brother) decided to make reproductions of family daguerreotype portraits for all our grandchildren, his and mine, and he suggested that I assist him by compiling the notes to accompany the pictures. That called for a great deal of research, both on his part and mine. The last time he talked with me before his death he remarked that all the portraits were in order, and he urged me to carry on from there.

I have gone into considerable detail concerning the environment and events of my early impressionable years, perhaps because it is pleasant to remember happy, far-off times, but also, I think, in the hope that even at this late date you will be enabled to know me a little better, and understand why I am as I am!

FLORA MCCREA EATON

Eaton Hall, King City, Ontario
September, 1956

FOREWORD

THIS BOOK is a truly Canadian product. First, it was written by Lady Eaton, a talented woman of Canadian birth and parentage. It stems from an immigrant of Northern Ireland who in early life made this country his home, and who, without advantage other than what flows from courage, resolution and toil, builded among us an institution greater than has been. While in its first sentence this modest volume is described by its author as the story of her life and times it is really much more than that. It deals with those associated with her life and work much more than with herself, and especially with those associated with the great business entity which was growing up to huge dimensions before their eyes.

Inevitably the figure of Timothy Eaton is very much in view, and always with admiration. Nor does that of his brilliant son suffer even by comparison. Both of these men were bound to the author by ties of affection.

It is my opinion that nothing in Lady Eaton's book is dealt with more ably than her own girlhood. After seeing and experiencing all or very much of good that the world has to offer, she plainly prizes most the simple homely teaching and habits that were honoured in her home. No tribute is withheld in devotion to her parents. Limitations are acknowledged faithfully, but always graciously. Never is there lost to sight her primary purpose, to paint a true picture of the founders down to the present generation of the Eaton household.

Every reader and particularly those who can remember

the event as heralded by newspapers of those days, will be eager to reach, as one does early in these pages, an account of the marriage which was to unite the rapidly advancing, yes, the already proven, son and chosen successor of Timothy Eaton with the comely, competent village maiden who now, at the climax of a crowded life, modestly takes her place as historian of the Eaton family. This family, widely extended as it is at present, can be said to be in large measure her own.

As one wends his way through the mazes of this remarkable woman's activities he finds himself filled with admiration that one person without rarely adventitious circumstances could achieve so much. In the fields of active charity alone—and they are many—she has been a tireless and effective leader throughout a comparatively long life, often involving the assumption and, as well, the discharging of continuing responsibilities. She is one of those of whom it can be said that she passed not by on the other side. In the good things of this world as in its burdens, which, indeed, are in reality many times the same, she has shown a capacity to share abundantly. Like the poet Landor, and perhaps more intently than he, she has never ceased to

warm both hands before the fire of life.

ARTHUR MEIGHEN

MEMORY'S WALL

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
FLORA McCREA EATON

CHAPTER III

WHEN I WAS eighteen I was filled with a restless stirring and dissatisfaction. The music studies which I had taken up a year or so before had lost their initial appeal. One reason was that the teacher, a Lindsay organist, who came once a week to instruct our Omemee class of eight, had moved away, and his successor evinced little enthusiasm for out-of-town trips to village groups. So, in spite of having shown considerable progress with my piano work, I abandoned the idea of making music a major pursuit, and instead I decided to become a nurse.

This new plan meant that I would go to Toronto for my training, and my parents were not too happy about that. Nevertheless they did not put any real difficulty in my way, knowing that my sister was already established in the city as a teacher and that we had some good family friends there.

I remember very vividly indeed those two special days, one of good-byes in Omemee and the other of introduction to the iodoform atmosphere of a big hospital. The day I left home I felt very mature. My trunk and bag were driven to the station but I preferred to walk with my two friends as I had done so many times before, just to see the train come in and make a note of who got off or got on, if anybody. But this time I would not be hurrying back to give the family the news, for today I was the traveller and on my way to an exciting larger world of new faces and new tasks.

An interesting cross-section of them awaited me two days later when I reported in at the Toronto General Hospital as a student nurse. There was, to begin with, Miss Snively,

the Superintendent of Nurses; a handsome woman, fairly tall, very erect, with a mass of white hair very carefully arranged. An imposing figure, and to my young eyes rather stern and forbidding, she wore, as always, black silk with white at the neck and wrists. I was asked various questions, then sent to a surgical ward where there was a senior nurse with a black band on her cap and a junior who had not yet won this supreme mark of attainment.

In those days the Toronto General Hospital was on Gerrard Street East—a nice-looking, rambling old building which had been added to many times, but seldom for the express purpose of convenience. There were long passages from one ward to another, bridges between buildings with the result that nurses and internes walked miles in one day. The architectural patchwork, together with the dust from the streets and the smoke from factories near by, made the place a constant battleground against dirt—and at that time it was the student nurses, armed with brushes, pails, dust-mops, who were expected to wage the war. That sort of energetic housekeeping was familiar to me, and I could do it thoroughly and cheerfully. Taking temperatures and pulse, washing hands and faces of patients before meals were more taxing jobs. I was never quite sure if I was reading the thermometer correctly. On the other hand, I liked rolling bandages, folding dressings, making wipes. Bed-making was a rigorous technique then as now: the corners had to be square, everything mathematically perfect, the patient included.

Occasionally, on a Sunday or a nurse's day off, I was left alone while the senior went to lunch. On one such occasion Dr. Herbert Bruce came in and asked for the head nurse; I explained and said I would go for her. He replied, "No, I think you can do what I need quite well. Bring me the dressing tray, please." So, to my great joy, I made rounds with the surgeon, and only later discovered that Dr. Bruce was feared as well as admired by the senior nurses. The beginner did not know how to be afraid! I must have

CHAPTER V

TWO YEARS after our marriage, in the month of May, our first child was born. There was great rejoicing for he was the first male Eaton of his generation, and it was a foregone conclusion that he could not be called anything but Timothy, for his grandfather, and Craig for his father. The house on Walmer Road became all excitement and stir with this addition to the group, and it seemed necessary to alter the entire adult schedule to suit our son's daily routine. I can confess now, in the calmness of age, that Timothy was one of those unfortunate first babies on whom all the "latest" methods were tried, even to a starvation diet. He survived my over-zealous efforts, but he was a small child and is today the shortest member of my family.

Timothy's mechanical aptitudes emerged at a very early age. Before he was two years old we realized we must keep a close watch on his experiments. One time, left alone in the sewing-room for a few moments, he picked up a knitting needle to see what would happen when he poked it into the electric outlet. Result: a ghastly shock for him, and blown-out fuses for the whole house. When I reprimanded him and warned him never to do that again, he said meekly, "I won't, Mummie. It hurt." Nevertheless there were always new challenges to tempt him. It was a year or two later when I heard a crash in the garage one evening just before Jack was due from the Store. I hurried out to find the door hanging by one roller, and young Timothy sitting in my husband's electric car which had been backed into the door. I was pretty shaken and brought the child into the house

to wait for his father. Jack took a serious view of it too, especially when in the course of their man-to-man talk he asked, "Timothy, why did you do that?" and the child replied, "Well, you see, Daddy, I was s'prised, for I had done it in the morning, both forward and back, and nothing happened."

By this time our garage was hardly big enough, for I too, had a car, an electric runabout. I wasn't really interested. Several years before, Jack had given me a nice bay horse and a smart basket trap with a coachman's seat behind. I used to drive downtown or anywhere and thoroughly enjoyed it. But cars were in Jack's blood, and with characteristic persistence and after months of persuasion he won me over to the idea of a car of my own. Electrics were rarities on Toronto streets then, and plenty of stares followed me on my worried course. On my first indoctrination it seemed that nothing could be simpler to manage than this elegant little box supported on rubber-tired carriage wheels. In front of the driver was a guide wheel on which was placed a smaller metal circle with a straight bar; this bar had four positions to make contact—one, two, three forward, and the fourth for reversing. There was also a foot brake.

I used the car fairly frequently yet never quite succeeded in having full confidence in it or in myself. One morning I put myself into the street car rails on Bloor near Spadina; as the points were turned for Spadina and my thin rubber tires were stuck in the rails I perforce had to turn on to Spadina and had some difficulty getting back on my Bloor course. Another time I was driving a friend home, and as I turned from Bloor to Bedford Road the wheel did not come round far enough and so the car moved straight on, up over the pavement and through the closed ornamental gate of Miss Veales' School for Young Ladies. I had enough sense to shut off the power and push hard on the brake, but before we came to a standstill Miss Veales'

gate was flat on the driveway and we were reposing on top of it.

Motoring in those early days was a constant adventure, because of the condition of the roads, the limitations of the cars, and the lack of any handy assistance as we have it today. Some twenty years ago Timothy and John David and I were on a motor tour of the Gaspé Peninsula and New Brunswick, the boys doing the driving in two-hour shifts. In New Brunswick we encountered a partially completed highway being put through a swamp. Rain the night before had worsened conditions, and pretty soon we were solidly mired. The boys cheerfully went to get help, and while they were gone I decided to stretch my legs. I stepped out of the car into ankle-deep mud. Eventually a Government bull-dozer came by and pulled us out, and on our way to Fredericton I remarked how that incident reminded me of almost daily adventures years before. I said, "I always sat still when we got stuck, until your father had tried several times to use engine power to get us out, then I announced that I would go for help. I generally managed to find a farmer with a team of horses to come and haul us out, and I met some very nice, friendly people that way." Both the boys said, "Mother, you must write a book on early motoring."

The motor-car invaded my life at a time when I much preferred horses as a means of locomotion. But nothing could stop the march of mechanical progress, and even I learned to drive fairly competently after those first trials with the electric. Once, just after one of the boys had received his driver's licence, I had asked him to drive me over to Miss Ethel Shepherd's place, about eight miles from *Eaton Hall*. The car was a new seven-passenger Franklin. At that time I had become nervous about handling the wheel—it was a complex, if you like—and the family sensed it. When we were leaving Miss Shepherd's, my son stood beside the car and said, "Now, Mother, you drive us home." I tried to evade it, but he said, "Look, you were

driving cars when some of the women on the highways today hadn't even seen one. You're a good driver, so get in and take us home." Such flattery was too much for me, and I did as ordered. When we got to our own front door, John turned to me triumphantly and said, "There now, what did I tell you!"

Early in 1904 transportation of a different kind was much on our minds. At that time Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Eaton had made arrangements to go by train to Atlantic City, and Jack planned to go down with them to see them comfortably settled in their hotel. When they boarded the train in the Union Station, Toronto, it was found that through some error Mr. and Mrs. Eaton's drawing-room had been sold twice, and the other party, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Cox, (he is remembered today as Senator H. C. Cox, President of Canada Life) were already in occupancy. Bert immediately said, "Jack, we'll move out at once; your father and mother must have the drawing-room." At first Jack's parents refused to consider the suggestion, but finally they had to bend to their young friends' kindness.

It was this mix-up in reservations, and the constant concern all of us had for Mr. Eaton's difficulty in getting about, that compelled Jack to look into the possibility of having a private car for railway travel. He started inquiries in New York, and on his return home he continued his quest with the C.P.R. in Montreal. Within a few weeks the car was ordered, and eventually delivered.

The *Eatonia*, as it was christened, covered countless thousands of miles up, down and across Canada, and into the United States. It simplified travelling for Mr. and Mrs. Eaton and was often a family headquarters as others joined them on their journeys. Frequently my husband used it on his trips to western towns where hotel accommodation was sometimes scanty. I always felt that the *Eatonia* was the most luxurious kind of travel, though I must say there was nothing for show, but everything for comfort and



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